

## Great Ming 241

Chapter 241: Buying Books Includes Grain

Li Daoxuan looked at the scene before him with a mix of amusement and exasperation.

Two carts of grain had been completely snatched away.

Ground Rabbit was also hoisted up by other soldiers from the militia.

He probably knew he had done wrong, his head hanging low.

Two militia soldiers beside him stared at him with odd expressions.

Zheng Gouzi lightly punched him: "You lad, now you've gotten me in trouble too."

His tone wasn't fierce, and the punch wasn't hard.

He could guess what Ground Rabbit was thinking.

Mr. Wang and Gao Yiye walked up to him.

They also looked at him with peculiar expressions.

Ground Rabbit raised his head: "Mr. Wang, Saint Lady, this rabbit made a mistake and violated orders. Punish this rabbit—this rabbit can accept any punishment."

Mr. Wang wore an odd expression and seemed uncertain what to say.

Gao Yiye listened to the Deity's instruction before speaking with a strange smile.

"Alright, then behead him."

Ground Rabbit's face changed dramatically: "Huh? It's that severe?"

Gao Yiye glanced sideways: "Didn't you say you could accept any punishment? Intentionally destroying military provisions is no minor crime."

Ground Rabbit was drenched in sweat: "It...it...just now...seeing the common folk suffering so terribly...this rabbit truly couldn't help it..."

Gao Yiye sighed softly: "But what good would giving them two carts of grain do? How many people could two carts of grain save?"

Ground Rabbit: "..."

"Saving people requires proper methods." Gao Yiye said: "I'm not speaking my own words now—these are the Deity's direct instructions. Currently, the fastest way to rescue these common folk is to first spread the Deity's glory. Only then can the Deity personally intervene and grant them grain. Only that can save every last commoner in this city. It's absolutely not something you can achieve with a sneaky trick like overturning one or two carts of grain."

Ground Rabbit lowered his head: "This rabbit knows...but...couldn't hold back..."

Mr. Wang shook his head: "The Deity had actually already ordered us to overturn two carts of grain while you were pushing the cart over. You just acted on your own before the command arrived."

Ground Rabbit: "Eh? Eh? Eh?"

Mr. Wang continued: "The Deity is compassionate—how could he refuse to save the common folk? By acting recklessly without waiting for the Deity's orders, did you believe the Deity lacked mercy or was unmoved by these refugees?"

Ground Rabbit's sweat poured down as he thumped to his knees: "I was wrong."

He didn't even use his usual "this rabbit" catchphrase this time—replacing it with "I"—proving he sincerely wasn't joking around.

Li Daoxuan smiled faintly.

Although this man was habitually bold and unruly, known for his reckless mischief—even ranked by Cheng Xu as one of Gaojia Village's three idiots—closer observation revealed he possessed many admirable qualities.

Last time when taught Army Combat Techniques, he refused to keep it to himself, risking missing the lesson entirely to call his comrades and study together.

Now, risking severe punishment, he deliberately overturned grain carts just to help refugees.

He was someone willing to sacrifice his own interests for others.

Such integrity was truly precious.

Li Daoxuan spoke up: "Let him stand up. Deduct half a year of his military pay. Additionally, after returning, punish him by copying the three major disciplines and eight points of attention one hundred times."

Gao Yiye said: "Stand up..."

Ground Rabbit stood, head still drooping.

Gao Yiye glanced sideways: "The Deity has forgiven you—why still wear such a bitter face?"

Ground Rabbit replied: "Losing the pay is acceptable. But copying that a hundred times...it's too difficult! This rabbit would rather run around Gaojia Village a hundred times."

For a semi-literate like him, writing was far more exhausting than running.

Mr. Wang scolded jokingly, "If it weren't difficult, could it even be called a punishment? Obey obediently, or be careful the Deity really cuts your head off."

Ground Rabbit was so frightened he didn't dare speak.

After that minor hiccup, the transport team continued onward. Before long, they arrived at Chengcheng Bookstore. The grain was hauled into the backyard and piled up. The comic books were moved into the front hall and displayed on the shelves.

Just as they finished setting up and began selling, the old soldier from the city gate arrived with a huge entourage. He brought his elderly wife, son, daughter-in-law, grandson, as well as numerous aunts, uncles, elderly female relatives, and even the neighbor—just about everyone possible—to buy books.

Before purchasing, one last question had to be confirmed: "Is it true you get two liangs of flour for buying a book?"

"Of course it's true!" Mr. Wang smiled. "But everyone is limited to buying only one copy."

There was a loud commotion as the soldier's entire family surged forward. Even the baby held in someone's arms counted as a person eligible for a copy; a book was bought for the infant too.

Everyone walked home happily, carrying a book in their left hand and a sack of grain in their right. Halfway there, they couldn't resist flipping through the book to see what strange thing it was that actually came with two liangs of flour.

"It's 'Dao Xuan Deity's Demon Elimination Tale'! Seems like a story about an immortal subduing demons and monsters."

"Ever heard of this Dao Xuan Deity?"

“Nope!”

“Me neither.”

“Hey? I think I have!” one of the poorest relatives spoke up. “Heard about it a while back. This Dao Xuan Deity was giving out medicine free to poor folks, over at the side hall of the City God Temple. But no one in our family was sick, so I never went.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Well, the book didn’t cost us anyway, and you don’t even need to read to look at it (comic), so let’s see what it’s all about.”

“We did pay for this book.”

“No no, the book is free! What we paid for was the flour.”

“Hahaha, what cheap flour this was!”

The group returned home in high spirits. Having bought grain at low prices today, finally tonight they could eat just a little fuller than usual.

News that Chengcheng Bookstore was selling grain cheaply—no, wait, selling books—spread like wildfire. Since each person was limited to one book, everyone naturally dragged along friends and relatives to seize the benefit. Soon the news spread through the county town like a virus.

Little did they realize, Li Daoxuan’s approach was what was called the “Pinduoduo” tactics. By recklessly gathering more and more people to pull in benefits, the common folk would spontaneously advertise for him.

The first batch of two thousand comic books sold out in just half a day.

Those who missed out were extremely disappointed, deeply annoyed for failing to “seize the wool” (benefit).

However, within a few days, another two thousand books and a large grain transport team arrived. Quickly, this second batch of two thousand comic books also sold out...

This strange comic book became a bestseller overnight.

Though most buyers were there for the flour, once they had the book at home, they inevitably opened it. They wanted to see who this big sucker was who handed out grain in such a way.

Not until they looked inside did they realize—this wasn’t half bad!

The story was actually quite good!

So they read it. After all, in this year of the great disaster, farming was impossible, commerce was crippled, and common folk had virtually nothing to do. Having a weird book to flip through was still better than lying around dazed.

Chapter 242: The Li Family Takes Action

Chengcheng County, the county office.

Liang Shixian was frowning as he looked at the two men below the hall.

These two men had just been dragged to the hall by a shopkeeper, who was accusing them of stealing two steamed buns from his shop.

In previous years, Liang Shixian would have skipped holding a session for a minor theft like stealing buns, just giving the culprits a few sticks and tossing them out to be done with it.

But now, with grain prices soaring, a dou of rice could fetch a thousand coins, so two steamed buns were a huge sum, and casually handing out a couple of beatings wasn't suitable anymore—this had to be treated as “theft,” which could merit a “beheading” punishment.

But...

Was beheading someone for stealing two steamed buns really appropriate?

Liang Shixian felt it was inappropriate, but he didn't know how to properly sentence this case, so he was deeply troubled.

“The people suffer more greatly, theft grows bolder! Alas!”

The Clerk approached from the side and whispered, “Dong Weng, you can't keep dragging this out. Whatever the sentence should be, make it.”

Liang Shixian scowled darkly, “This case...”

As they were both troubled, a scholar walked in from outside. Liang Shixian didn't recognize him, but a nearby bailiff did, “Ah, it's Mr. Wang from the Chengcheng Bookstore.”

Mr. Wang cupped his hands to Liang Shixian, “County Lord, I am the proprietor of the Chengcheng Bookstore, with the surname Wang. I used to teach in Chengcheng County, so people call me Mr. Wang. I passed by just now and saw the County Lord troubled by this case. Could I offer a solution?”

Since Liang Shixian was troubled and someone was offering advice, it was excellent. He said quickly, “Mr. Wang, please speak.”

Mr. Wang said, “Killing someone over two steamed buns goes against nature, but if we don't punish it severely, the victim might not accept it...”

He was saying exactly what Liang Shixian was troubled by.

Mr. Wang continued, "Why not handle it like this: I'll pay some money to compensate the victim for these two thieves, so the victim can calm down. Then hand over these two thieves to my bookstore, have them carry books and clean up, using labor to pay for the two steamed buns. That would be their punishment."

Hearing this, Liang Shixian was delighted, "This plan is brilliant, but I'm sorry to trouble you, sir."

Mr. Wang smiled slightly, "No trouble, no trouble. My bookstore really needs some help. If I can hire two workers for a few days with two steamed buns, I'd be very happy."

Liang Shixian nodded, "Then we'll go with your plan, sir."

Solving a headache of a case made him quite pleased. He waved to the bailiff beside him, "Escort these two men to Mr. Wang's bookstore and command them to work hard. If they're lazy or neglectful, catch them back, and I'll cut off their damned heads."

Mr. Wang bowed, paid the victim for the two steamed buns, and walked away leisurely.

Liang Shixian lifted his head and sighed softly, "The method Mr. Wang just proposed is truly the best way to handle thieves, but it requires enough money. Otherwise, how could we afford to keep so many thieves alive?"

In the Ming Dynasty, criminals were usually held in jail awaiting execution. For non-capital crimes, they'd get dozens of strokes or be exiled thousands of miles away, but they weren't imprisoned long-term because the court couldn't afford to feed so many offenders.

Liang Shixian actually had criticisms about this, but he was powerless.

He was still wallowing in sorrow when the Clerk came over and whispered, "By the way, seeing Mr. Wang reminds me of something."

Liang Shixian asked, "What?"

The Clerk whispered, "Lately, the Chengcheng Bookstore has been selling a strange comic book for one copper coin, and buyers get two liang of flour as a gift."

Liang Shixian froze upon hearing this, and after a few seconds, said, "One copper coin for a book plus two liang of flour? Isn't that like distributing congee to save the people?"

The Clerk whispered, "Yes, no different from distributing congee. Many in the city have benefited and say behind closed doors that Mr. Wang is a kind proprietor. But if this continues, he might lose all his wealth and the bookstore could shut down in days."

Liang Shixian sighed, "Ruining his family fortune just to save the people? Hmm... Now that you mention it, I've become interested in his book."

The Clerk pulled one out from his sleeve.

Liang Shixian was shocked, "You have it?"

The Clerk's old face flushed, "Forgive my foolishness, County Lord. My wife also bought one..."

Liang Shixian paused, then understood. With dou of rice costing a thousand coins, even someone at the Clerk's income level struggled, so how many common people in Chengcheng County could afford grain? What were they to do? Ah!

Feeling low, Liang Shixian took the book from the Clerk and casually scanned the cover.

Huh?

The Dao Xuan Deity Statue on the cover caught his attention.

He seemed to have seen this immortal's face somewhere?

He looked at the words beside it: “Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale.”

Dao Xuan Deity?

The name also sounded familiar.

He had to think hard!

Liang Shixian, knowledgeable in many matters, immediately activated a memory search in his mind. Things he’d seen, scenes he’d experienced, books he’d read, gods he’d worshiped all flashed through his thoughts like a spinning lantern, until with a “ding,” it settled on an enormous fortress.

In the ancestral hall on the first floor of the watchtower of Gaojia Village’s Li Family Fortress, they enshrined a household deity named “Dao Xuan Deity,” and its statue had the same face as this comic book cover.

Liang Shixian had it figured out now. He slowly opened the book—it was a picture book. He flipped through the pages quickly, and the story inside became clear.

The story outside also became clear.

Liang Shixian whispered, “I understand now.”

The Clerk was greatly curious, “What did Dong Weng understand?”

Liang Shixian said, “Behind Mr. Wang is the Li Family providing support. For over a year, the Li Family has been supplying me with grain for distributing congee to save the people. But that only won me a reputation as an honest official, while the Li Family got zero benefit. Now the Li Family has decided to step in directly.”

The Clerk stammered, “Eh? Isn’t the Li Family a reclusive great clan? What use is gaining fame? The more famous they get, the harder it is to stay behind the scenes, right?”

Liang Shixian said, “So they didn’t promote the Li Family itself; they brought out their ancestor, the household deity, the Tang Dynasty imperial clan member Li Daoxuan! While distributing congee to save the people, they’re pushing their household deity in a big song. If the story is fabricated tightly enough to place the household deity in all Taoist shrines nationwide, what glory to their ancestors!”

The Clerk suddenly understood, “So that’s how it is. Dong Weng truly thinks comprehensively—I hadn’t considered it at all.”

Liang Shixian said, “The story is chaotic equipment, unworthy of reading. But the Li Family is doing good deeds—what harm in creating a deity tale? Let them make up whatever they want. As long as they’re giving grain to the people, they can even turn me into part of the story if they like.”

#### Chapter 243: The First Apparition of the Deity

In the evening, Gao Yiye walked on the streets of the county town.

For several days recently, she had been staying in the guest room behind the Chengcheng Bookstore.

Life in the county town was not happy. Here, there were no open fields, no childhood playmates, and no group of smiling, kind villagers.

What caught the eye were all narrow streets, dilapidated houses, listless refugees, and officials with somber expressions...

Fortunately, the militia had left some members there to protect her, saving her from being left without companions to talk to. Especially Ground Rabbit—this guy was a good partner for speaking weird or rebellious things.

Gao Yiye walked and asked: “Mr. Rabbit, are things ready with Third Lady?”

Ground Rabbit chuckled: “Ready. Third Lady said once the Deity signals, she’ll lead her team out immediately.”

Gao Yiye immediately looked up at the sky. The low cloud representing the Deity floated about sixty or seventy ren in height. She could clearly see the Deity giving her a gentle smile in the cloud: "It's fine. Go ahead."

Gao Yiye was rushing with pride: "The Deity has ordered it. Action can begin. Let's go!"

Ground Rabbit grinned: "Alright."

He turned around and gestured to the militia members behind him: "Move out."

Zheng Gouzi protested from the crowd: "Mr. Rabbit, why are you in charge?"

Ground Rabbit laughed heartily: "When Instructor He is away, the militia is commanded by me, Mr. Rabbit. Didn't you all know?"

Everyone: "There's no such thing."

Ground Rabbit: "I, Mr. Rabbit, am clever and witty, and have achieved several great deeds for Gaojia Village. I'm the unchallenged deputy leader. If you don't believe, ask the Deity."

Everyone looked up together.

Li Daoxuan laughed: "Lift him up and throw him into the roadside ditch."

Gao Yiye chuckled and relayed the Decree of the Deity.

Then the militia men immediately lifted Ground Rabbit and tossed him into the ditch. With a splashing sound, Ground Rabbit got drenched in filthy water. He crawled out of the ditch and spread his hands: "Ah! It seems I, Mr. Rabbit, need to try harder to win the Deity's approval."

His skill at laughing after being humiliated and amusing others by making a fool of himself was rather impressive. Li Daoxuan did appreciate that about him.

The group escorted Gao Yiye through refugee-filled streets to the front of the City God Temple.

Third Lady had been waiting respectfully there for a long time. Behind her stood over one hundred devout men and women, the poorest commoners in the county town, all in ragged clothes and looking pale-faced from hunger.

They were the first group of believers recruited by Third Lady last year, also the most pious followers of the new deity Dao Xuan Deity in Chengcheng County.

Early in the morning, they were notified by Third Lady to assemble at the City God Temple by evening. They didn't really grasp what Third Lady was saying, but they came obediently all the same.

Seeing Gao Yiye arrive, Third Lady was rushing with pride: "Is it time?"

"En!" Gao Yiye nodded: "The Deity says it's fine."

Third Lady turned to the over one hundred devout men and women behind her and said: "Everyone, listen well. I gathered you here today to take you to pay respects to Dao Xuan Deity. His Eminence has agreed to appear before you once."

At those words, all the devout men and women showed faces of ecstatic joy.

Third Lady: "But the county town is crowded with many eyes, full of folk who don't know about His Eminence. Out of kindness, the Deity doesn't want to frighten them. So everyone must go outside the city for Him to appear in the small grove. Now, let's go! Everyone, move."

The devout men and women didn't doubt it at all and followed submissively.

Gao Yiye led at the front, guarded by militia members, and Third Lady brought up the rear with hundreds of believers. Such a huge crowd heading to the city gates made them very conspicuous.

Two old soldiers guarding the city gates hurriedly blocked them: “What are you doing? It’s evening time—don’t go out and scatter aimlessly. Rebels swarm outside; it’s very unsafe.”

Third Lady stepped forward with a grave, dignified look: “We have received Dao Xuan Deity’s grace, winning a chance to meet His Eminence. The Deity will manifest in the grove outside to give us instruction...”

If this were heard in the past, the old soldiers would shout “Arrest the White Lotus demons!” But not long ago, these soldiers and their families had bought copies of “Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale” with gifts of grain and saw the comic book.

They no longer saw Third Lady as a White Lotus demon and opened the city gates: “Go on, go on. But! This “Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale” thing... cough... Treat it as a storybook—fun to look at for laughs is all. Do you really believe it and go out searching? How idle you are...”

The old soldiers’ attitude reflected that of most people in Chengcheng County.

This sudden new deity hadn’t gained widespread trust yet. Even beneficiaries getting grains remained skeptical.

So Li Daoxuan hadn’t rashly “acted,” but eased in slowly, starting with “appearing” to the most devout to gently win over the townsfolk.

One must take things slowly, especially a man—rushing isn’t good.

Third Lady’s group left the city. Gao Yiye led the way, soon reaching a grove east of town. Looking back, the county town blurred in sight. The sun had set, casting a dim, yellow glow.

The grove was dry, all trees without green leaves, their bare branches stretching grotesquely at the sky...

Strangely, the devout men and women weren’t scared! Instead, they gazed up with devout faces: “Will the Deity appear here?”

Third Lady glanced sideways at Gao Yiye; Gao Yiye nodded.

Third Lady understood. She raised the “Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale,” flipped to a page, pointed to an image showing the Deity crushing a monster with a giant hand, and announced loudly: “Everyone, pay attention. The Deity will soon perform this divine act. You’re privileged to witness the giant hand of the Deity smiting demons.”

The devout men and women rejoiced and promptly chanted: “Long life and great blessings!”

Then they saw a sight they’d never forget.

A giant golden hand emerged from the clouds...

Finger joints adorned with a row of colorful gemstones.

“Wow, the comic book is black-and-white—we couldn’t see that the Deity’s hand was golden like this.”

“I always thought it’d be flesh-colored like ours, but it’s a huge golden hand!”

“Long live the Deity!”

The devout men and women shouted with frenzied excitement. The golden hand descended slowly. Before them, it unfolded its palm, revealing a small mound of flour balls piled atop it.

Gao Yiye smiled softly: “Take as much as you can carry. This is the Deity’s reward to you.”

Chapter 244: Legends of the Deity

The devout were overjoyed. When they received Third Lady’s notice about witnessing the Deity manifesting, they hadn’t been entirely certain they would see anything. After all, having lived so long, none had truly witnessed a deity reveal itself.

Who could have imagined that today, not only did they witness the Dao Xuan Deity manifesting, but they were also granted a gift? It was an unexpected delight.

“This... this entire mound of flour balls... truly for us to take?”

“Take them!” Gao Yiye smiled. “The Deity has spoken: take as much as you can carry, but do not be greedy. For greed is a major sin.”

The devotees hastily offered their thanks, bowing deeply before climbing up along the Deity’s enormous finger.

Standing upon that colossal golden palm filled them with awe and fear. Several individuals knelt and bowed after each step they took. Proceeding at a pace no faster than a snail’s crawl.

Li Daoxuan kept his hand inside the box, palm upturned and motionless—a posture that was far from comfortable. Watching the miniature people’s sluggish movements, he couldn’t help but say, “Hey! It’s getting dark! Quit dawdling! Move faster.”

Hearing this, the little people collectively startled: Ah! They were delaying the Old Deity’s important business!

They immediately quickened their pace, darting toward the mound of flour balls in a few strides.

They hadn’t brought containers and weren’t sure how to carry the flour. Fortunately, nearing winter, everyone wore thick clothing with multiple layers. Removing an outer garment, they scooped flour into it, bundling it tightly by tying the sleeves. Thus, each became a large flour-laden “clothing sack.”

Hoisting this sack onto their backs, they jumped down from the Deity’s “divine hand.” Barely steadying themselves, they saw the enormous hand ascend back into the sky, retreating into the clouds until it vanished.

The devotees felt as though awakening from a grand dream. All they had witnessed seemed unreal—but the tangible weight of the “flour sacks” upon them testified otherwise.

“Enough, return home now.” Third Lady wore a solemn expression. “Today, the Deity bestowed you exceptional mercy, not only manifesting before your eyes but granting you sustenance as well. Need I remind you of your duty henceforth?”

Of course they understood: wholehearted loyalty to the Deity henceforth. Commanding east, no westward wandering; if ordered west, immediate about-face.

After all, this was a true deity!

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Meanwhile, at the Waxi Archway, Fengxin County, Jiangxi.

The forty-one year old Song Yingxing sat upon a large stone before his house. He observed a group of craftsmen constructing buildings in the distance while fervently scribbling notes onto paper.

He was composing a book titled “Heavenly Mechanisms and Fabrics,” documenting all known agricultural and handicraft production techniques.

The current section concerned “tripartite mortar”: one part river sand, two parts yellow earth, mixed with glutinous rice juice and Actinidia vine pulp... solidifies exceptionally upon building, never deteriorates... hence named Tripartite Mortar...

Precisely at this moment, he sensed someone standing before him.

Looking up, he saw a travel-worn middle-aged Taoist priest.

This Taoist was Ma Tianzheng. He beamed, greeting, “Long life and great blessings! Are you Song Yingxing, Sir?”

“I am Song Yingxing,” Song Yingxing replied. “How may I assist you, Maestro?”

Without a word, Ma Tianzheng produced a spring coil.

Song Yingxing's attention instantly locked onto the spring. What peculiar object was this? Iron wire? But coiled layer upon layer?

Just as this thought formed, Ma Tianzheng clasped his palms together—flattening the coil instantly.

“?”

Even as Song Yingxing's brow furrowed in puzzlement, Ma Tianzheng spread his hands. The coil sprang back into shape with a distinct “biu!”

“Eh? Ah! Fascinating! Utterly fascinating!” Song Yingxing exclaimed. “What is this? How does such elasticity exist?”

Ma Tianzheng offered no explanation—nor was he truly equipped to do so. Instead, he silently placed a small sack of cement and a sheet of paper detailing its usage method before Song Yingxing.

He deposited the spring, the cement, and the instructions into Song Yingxing's hands, turned and strode away. As he walked, he tossed back, “This humble Daoist lodges at the dilapidated temple a mile west. Seek me there if you wish to speak further.”

Utterly bewildered, Song Yingxing mused on the unusual Daoist... Yet his curiosity for the odd paled against his fascination with the objects now in his hands. Setting aside the eccentric priest, he examined the spring coil—unable to put the delightful puzzle down. Within moments, dozens of potential applications flooded his mind, thrilling him to restlessness.

Turning his scrutiny to the curious gray powder, he glanced at the instructions. “Hmm?” He compared the cement instructions against his freshly penned “Tripartite Mortar Recipe,” sensing an elusive similarity between them.

He urgently beckoned a servant: “Quick! Fetch me river sand! Hurry!”

...

In Chengcheng County, rumors concerning the Dao Xuan Deity multiplied day by day.

Street corners, lanes, teahouses, taverns—everywhere, conversations swirled around the deeds of the Dao Xuan Deity.

“Hey, hear this? My neighbor Li Gudan saw the Dao Xuan Deity manifesting with his own eyes!”

“My neighbor Wang Laoqi swears he saw the Deity personally!”

“Pure hogwash! I’ve heard countless deity tales since infancy, never actually laid eyes on one manifesting.”

“Sounds like boasting to me. Utterly unreliable.”

“Young Erwa even claims he saw the Deity’s colossal hand! Bigger than the one drawn in Dao Xuan Deity’s Demon Elimination Tale!”

“Boasts, all boasts! Those devotees? Conned silly by Daoist priests! Spinning wild yarns about absent deities? Bah! If deities truly existed, why so much suffering?”

“The Daoist would surely retort: your suffering stems from sins in past lives! Hahaha! Not because gods are absent! Hahaha!”

“Enough! You’re wrong! I genuinely saw the Old Deity! He bestowed an enormous sack of flour upon me!”

“Right, right, we believe you... hahaha!”

“You scoff? Hmph! Suit yourself! The unbelievers simply won’t get this flour.”

These discussions drifted to Li Daoxuan as he “patrolled” high above. He couldn’t suppress a faint smile.

Good. Though doubters remained, believers steadily grew. This was precisely the “popular support” he needed.

Once that foundation solidified... his actions would yield exceptional results.

His thoughts broke abruptly: a fast horse galloped into the county town. Its rider wore the servant garb of Liang Shixian’s household. Charging wildly through the streets, the rider bellowed: “Urgent military intelligence! Clear the road! URGENT MILITARY INTELLIGENCE!” ...

Chapter 245: Guyuan Mutiny

Hearing the words “urgent military intelligence,” Li Daoxuan’s gaze subtly sharpened as he followed the messenger’s hurried steps.

Soon, the man dashed into the county office.

Liang Shixian was handling trivial matters in the main hall when his servant burst in, shouting frantically, “Master, disaster! Disaster has struck! Guyuan’s troops have mutinied! Rebel forces are advancing this way...”

“What?”

Liang Shixian leapt to his feet instantly. “What happened? Explain!”

The servant cried out urgently, “The border army’s pay has been withheld. The court has delayed their wages for three full years. Guyuan’s border forces rebelled! Some joined the roaming bandits, while others demanded their unpaid wages and marched toward Xi’an!”

These words sent chills down Liang Shixian’s spine. The border army—it was the border army!

The border troops’ ferocity made ordinary bandits seem utterly insignificant in comparison.

Just how terrifying would their uprising be?

Liang Shixian pressed urgently, “What did the Provincial Governor say?”

Servant: “I inquired in Xi’an. Provincial Governor Hu Tingyan of Shaanxi and Provincial Governor Yue Hesheng of Yansui are blaming each other. Each claims this is the other’s responsibility. The two governors are locked in pointless argument, completely ignoring the rebel threat!”

Liang Shixian: “...”

Li Daoxuan: “...”

One on the ground, the other in the sky—both fell silent.

The Clerk crept forward anxiously, face clouded with fear. “Dong Weng, will the Guyuan rebels storm our Chengcheng County?”

Liang Shixian: “I must give this careful thought.”

Being knowledgeable in many matters, Liang Shixian instantly activated strategic analysis mode in his mind. Guyuan’s position, Xi’an’s location, Chengcheng’s placement—the intervening terrain and official roads spun like a whirligig through his thoughts before suddenly ding, the answer arrived.

Guyuan lay northwest of Xi’an, while Chengcheng existed northeast of Guyuan. The three formed a triangle. Rebels traveling directly from Guyuan toward Xi’an couldn’t possibly pass through Chengcheng.

Liang Shixian exhaled in relief. “Rest easy. Guyuan’s rebels won’t come here.”

Just then, a galloping horse charged into the county office. The rider dismounted with breathtaking agility, fluid as drifting clouds—it was Patrol Officer Fang Wushang, striding hastily into the hall.

He shouted the moment he entered, “Disaster strikes! Guyuan’s troops have mutinied! Rebels are surging toward Xi’an!”

Liang Shixian: “Officer Fang received word too?”

Fang Wushang nodded grimly. “The border army is no mere bandit mob. This crisis spells serious trouble. Magistrate Liang, we must plan how to resist these rebels.”

Liang Shixian: “Stay calm, Officer Fang. I’ve analyzed the situation—they won’t reach Chengcheng County. No need for alarm.”

He briefly explained his triangular theory.

Fang Wushang snapped angrily, “Magistrate Liang, do you recall the He Yang bandit Fan Shanyue? When he invaded Chengcheng from Heyang County, you drew a straight line between the counties and rashly concluded he’d enter via Quangou Village. What happened? Fan Shanyue instead attacked through Zhengjia Village and Gaojia Village! Thankfully, Gaojia Village’s militia was well-prepared and held him off with rolling logs and stones, or the consequences would’ve been catastrophic!”

Liang Shixian: “Ah!”

Fang Wushang: “Hmph! Warfare isn’t child’s play drawing lines on maps!”

Liang Shixian stood speechless.

Li Daoxuan grew intrigued now. Would Guyuan’s rebels truly come? Better research this online first.

Swiftly, he found this line on Baidu: “Guyuan troops attack Jingyang and Fuping...”

These two place names were utterly unfamiliar to him; he had no idea where they were. He had no choice but to open a certain map application again. After typing “Jingyang,” he was startled to find it extremely close to Xi’an, practically right outside the northwest gate of Xi’an city.

He then searched for “Fu Ping County” and couldn’t help but frown.

Fu Ping County was northeast of Xi’an, separated from Chengcheng by just the distance of one county seat. And the name of that county seat was actually quite famous: Bai Shui County.

That’s right. The hometown of Bai Shui Wang Er.

A sense of foreboding rose in Li Daoxuan’s heart.

The historical records only mention rebels attacking Fu Ping County, but can historical records be completely trusted?

Fu Ping County and Chengcheng were so close together. Was it possible that the rebels had actually also surged into Chengcheng, but because the disturbance wasn’t severe, the historical records simply omitted that part?

The historical records from the period of the Peasant Wars of the Late Ming Dynasty were utterly chaotic.

Li Daoxuan shifted his view to the backyard of the Chengcheng Bookstore. Gao Yiye was still staying there temporarily.

Life here for Gao Yiye was monotonous and dull, leaving her listless and uninterested all day long.

Li Daoxuan spoke softly, “Yiye, return to Gaojia Village immediately.”

Gao Yiye snapped her head up, overjoyed, “Can I go back?”

“Mhm!” Li Daoxuan said, “Go back quickly and notify Instructor He about the Guyuan garrison mutiny. Tell him to organize the civil corps and be prepared for battle at any moment.”

Gao Yiye had no idea how serious the Guyuan garrison mutiny was. Her face showed no fear; instead, she became happy, “Haha! I can finally go back to Gaojia Village!”

She dashed outside. Ground Rabbit and a troop from the civil corps were practicing martial arts outside. As soon as Gao Yiye emerged, she called out, “Let’s go, let’s go! We’re going back to Gaojia Village!”

Ground Rabbit was ecstatic, “We can go back?”

It seemed even this rabbit found the county town boring.

The group hurried further outside. Mr. Wang and a few companions were still selling books out there. The two fellows who had been punished for stealing steamed buns and were working there as laborers were also present. Gao Yiye went over and whispered a few words to Mr. Wang.

Mr. Wang was also startled. He waved at the two bun thieves, “Alright, you can leave now. The work you’ve done these past few days has paid off the debt for those two buns.”

Upon hearing they were being told to leave, their expressions instantly twisted. Though they had been punished to work here, the bookstore had been giving them meals—giving them meals, giving them meals! Important things must be said three times.

Suddenly being told to leave now, how could they bear it?

With a thump, both knelt down, “Sir, please take us with you. We’ll work like oxen or horses for you, we only ask for something to eat!”

Such occurrences were quite commonplace for people from Gaojia Village!

Originally, they found it laughable that someone would willingly become a “labor offender,” but now they only felt heartache and couldn’t find it funny anymore.

Mr. Wang helped them up, "Fine, come with us."

The group quickly headed out... soon passing through the city gates and leaving the county town.

The old soldier guarding the gate immediately ran towards the county office, "Reporting to County Lord Liang Shixian, all members of the Li Family from the bookstore have left the city."

Liang Shixian's face turned grave, "The Li Family's information really is fast. I only just received news here, and they already knew too. I was still hoping to ask for their help, but they just fled like that... truly..."

Fang Wushang's mind flashed with the image of Ground Rabbit. "Hmph," he snorted, "What's coming this time are border troops. That ragtag bunch from the Li Family might barely pass for fighting bandits, but against border troops, they'd only be wiped out. We never needed their help to begin with."

Liang Shixian said, "That's not entirely fair. More people mean greater strength. Sigh, I hope they can still lend a hand."

Chapter 246: Cheng Xu Organized the Troops

News of the Guyuan mutiny was quickly brought back to Gaojia Village by Gao Yiye.

Interestingly, the reactions among the people of Gaojia Village, similar to the differences between Liang Shixian and Fang Wushang, were also split between the civil and military groups.

Thirty-Two, Tan Liwen, Zhao Sheng, and others listened with calm expressions: "The rebel band in Guyuan probably won't come to our Chengcheng County. It's in the opposite direction."

But Cheng Xu slammed his fist hard onto the table: "This is bad. Ground Rabbit, go pass on my order right away: the Gaojia Village Militia must assemble immediately."

A few literati looked bewildered: "Huh? Instructor He, that reaction... will the rebels come?"

Cheng Xu: “How should I know if they’ll come? But war isn’t about drawing straight lines on a map. Troop routes change unpredictably. What if officials set a checkpoint somewhere along the direct path? The rebels might detour around it. Keep detouring, and they could end up at Chengcheng County. Haven’t you forgotten Fan Shanyue? He took a strange route up the eastern slope of Zhengdong Village towards us.”

The literati were startled: “Oh no! That’s awful. Instructor He, prepare quickly. What do you need us to help with?”

Cheng Xu, face dark, ran outside...

Soon after, the Gaojia Village Militia had assembled.

At this point, the Militia was different from a few months earlier, as its numbers had grown significantly.

After the three thousand people from Qingjian County arrived, the Militia selected a large group of strong and determined young men from Qingjian County villagers and enlisted them into the ranks.

This raised the total troop count of the Militia to five hundred.

Actually, for a village of over four thousand people, a five-hundred-man militia was quite small. In those days, typical village militias involved all able-bodied young men joining up. Whenever bandits threatened, every man would grab weapons.

But Gaojia Village did not do this.

Because Li Daoxuan wouldn’t allow it.

Li Daoxuan’s ideas came from a later time, rooted deeply in separating soldiers from peasants. He did not want to mimic the Ming Dynasty’s way with garrison troops, who farmed for centuries and fully became peasants.

Therefore, the Gaojia Village Militia expanded cautiously to ensure the number of professional soldiers stayed small and never depleted all male labor.

The five hundred men stood in five small squares, each with a small squad captain standing out front.

Cheng Xu organized the Militia like the Ming army: ten men formed a small squad led by a small squad captain, and ten small squads made up a large squad under a large squad captain.

Now, the five large squad captains in Gaojia Village were men whose names even Li Daoxuan couldn't remember. In contrast, the three idiots he always kept "Jian Zai Xian Xin" had no positions; they were just his three Guards, directly under Cheng Xu.

This wasn't hard to understand. Nobody in all of Gaojia Village complained. If the three idiots became large squad captains, folks would probably object.

Cheng Xu stood before the five hundred men and roared loudly: "You may face the toughest fight of your lives very soon. The Guyuan border army rebelled. Some joined the bandits and might come attacking while mixed in with Bu Zhan Ni's forces one day. Others are heading straight for Xi'an and could rush here to your doorstep any day."

The men: "..."

"That is the border army!" Cheng Xu's voice sounded torn: "That is the damn border army! I'm the instructor with my skills, but against an elite border soldier, I couldn't handle even two. Think for yourselves—how many do you reckon you could fight?"

The men quick gasped. Even Instructor He couldn't win two against one? How strong was that border army? Facing them, we'd probably...

Gao Chuwu raised his hand: "I think I can take three!"

Zheng Daniu: "If you can take three, I can also take three."

Ground Rabbit grinned: "I can take ten."

The men: "..."

Cheng Xu rolled his eyes: "Ground Rabbit, go run five laps around Gaojia Fortress."

Ground Rabbit: "Eh? Why am I the only one running? Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu were boasting too. Why aren't they punished?"

Cheng Xu was furious, "Only you're such a big windbag."

Ground Rabbit: "..."

Amid roaring laughter, Ground Rabbit started running.

The briefing continued on this side.

Cheng Xu: "I'll be brutally honest. With your combat ability is complete shit, even against a border army half your size, you'd be doomed. If you faced one larger than you, you wouldn't survive half an incense stick's worth of time."

Alarm flashed across everyone's faces.

Cheng Xu: "Thankfully, we have the Deity watching over us."

Only then did the crowd collectively sigh in relief. Right, right! Instructor He just loves scaring us. We still have the Deity watching over us.

Cheng Xu: "But the Deity is very busy. He occasionally visits other immortals and might not be there to watch over you. If you don't fight properly, you'll die."

Alarm flashed across everyone's faces again.

Cheng Xu: "That's right, old me is scaring you for fun. Scaring you serves one damn purpose: protecting the lives of you idiots. War isn't child's play. Listen the hell up to my orders! Only charge when I shout charge! When old me damn well shouts retreat, retreat even faster than me, got it? Retreat faster than me and you'll definitely survive, because my escape skills are top-notch."

The crowd responded loudly in unison: "Yes, sir!"

After Cheng Xu's mix of motivational speech, threats, and curses, he finally said, "Check your equipment."

The militia immediately began inspecting their gear.

All five hundred men already had armor. This was thanks to the increasing number of craftsmen in Gaojia Village. Higher wages attracted more people into the profession, as many commoners willingly joined the artisans' well as apprentices.

Making armor plates wasn't particularly difficult, and they could learn it quickly.

As for cotton cloth, the significant increase in the female population of Gaojia Village drastically boosted cloth production. This wasn't only sufficient for armor-making but also allowed all villagers to buy cotton cloth at very low prices to make clothes.

Thus, the speed of making the cotton armor in Gaojia Village had also considerably increased, fully equipping all five hundred men.

Gaojia Village didn't just make cotton armor; they also produced higher-grade gear, like the Mountain-patterned Armor Cheng Xu was already wearing. The Mountain-patterned Armor looked handsome and offered decent protection, serving both practical combat and ceremonial purposes, perfectly suited for a "person in authority" like him.

As for those two monsters, Gao Chuwu and Zheng Daniu, their monstrous physiques allowed them to wear heavier armor. Consequently, these two were almost entirely encased in iron armor. The plates wrapped their entire bodies, making them look like two giant iron men, terrifying beyond measure.

Additionally, all five hundred men were equipped with spears tipped with iron points, hand crossbows, and waist knives. Their gear was remarkably comprehensive.

The most interesting part...

The village also had ten small toys the blacksmiths made while practicing their skills. Li Daoxuan considered them useless, but the villagers saw them as fearsome weapons: Three-Eyed Divine Firearms.

In short, the five-hundred-strong militia of Gaojia Village were armed to the teeth.

Except for the lack of horses, everything else was quite perfect.

Chapter 247: Guerrilla General Li Ying Arrives

Li Daoxuan silently watched from the sky as the Gaojia Village Militia prepared for battle.

Cheng Xu had done well with the pre-battle arrangements. Li Daoxuan saw no need to intervene much and left it to him.

His attention should instead focus on the county seat—faster updates would come through Liang Shixian and Fang Wushang there.

He tapped the inscription “Chengcheng County” on the box. His view instantly shifted back to the county.

Just as he arrived, he witnessed an intriguing scene.

A Ming army unit was entering the town.

This force was sizable—a full thousand regular troops. They wore the Ming army’s signature cloth armor, many bearing small backward-curved bows.

Liang Shixian and Fang Wushang promptly went to greet them.

After listening to their exchange, Li Daoxuan learned the newcomer was “Guerrilla General Li Ying.”

The Guerrilla General position was a “miscellaneous-rank” military title—not formalized, without fixed rank, mostly a temporary appointment for emergencies.

Li Daoxuan needed only surface-level thought to guess this man was likely dispatched to handle the Guyuan mutiny.

Even without a fixed rank, his status hovered below Deputy General, roughly equivalent to “Subordinate Third Rank.” To Seventh Rank County Magistrate Liang Shixian and ninth-rank inspector Fang Wushang, he was a high-ranking officer.

Li Ying wore the arrogance of a senior official: “By Provincial Governor Hu’s order, I lead troops to crush the Guyuan rebels. Passing through Chengcheng County, we rest here tonight. Provide whatever fine food and drink you have. My thousand soldiers march to suppress bandits—don’t let them starve.”

Liang Shixian responded: “Three years of drought, plus Bai Shui Wang Er’s looting of our granaries, leaves Chengcheng County’s stores empty. I regret I cannot supply provisions.”

A flash of anger crossed Li Ying’s face.

Civil officials! A petty magistrate dares such insolence!

As he prepared to rage, Fang Wushang suddenly spoke: “General Li, this humble officer has a question. Pray enlighten me.”

Li Ying: “Ask.”

Fang Wushang said: “The Guyuan rebels move from Guyuan toward Xi’an. To engage them, you should head north via Jingyang or Fuping County. Why come to Chengcheng County? Are you avoiding battle? Leading your men on a meaningless tour to deceive the Provincial Governor?”

Li Ying exploded: “How dare you!”

Above, Li Daoxuan muttered, “Huh?” inwardly startled. This Fang Wushang is fierce! Truly a bold commander—to ask such a thing outright!

Liang Shixian shared the thought. As a civil official unfamiliar with strategy, he’d missed it initially. Fang Wushang’s words clarified everything—earning his silent praise. Brave, Inspector! If I’d noticed, I’d still weigh the risk before speaking.

Bold yet reckless!

Instantly, everyone present thought the same.

Li Ying’s face darkened—humiliated by a ninth-rank officer’s challenge and exposed by Fang Wushang’s accuracy.

His thousand troops looked imposing but were mere garrison soldiers—fine for bandit suppression but useless against border army rebels. Li Ying felt weak, wanting to dodge combat.

After receiving orders from Provincial Governor Hu Tingyan, he’d circled with his men—skirting Jingyang and Fuping—ending up in Chengcheng County.

This place avoided the rebels’ likely route but remained close enough to intervene if they weakened or faltered—perfect to advance or retreat.

His clever plan shattered when Fang Wushang named it. Fury followed.

“You lowly ninth-rank patrol officer! How dare you spew nonsense before me?” Li Ying roared. “What do you know of strategy, a minor inspector?”

Fang Wushang stiffened his neck. “Then I ask: Is your strategy to flee east when rebels appear strong? Advance west when they’re weak? Chengcheng County is convenient for both.”

Li Ying gripped his sword hilt. “Absurd! Who backs you?”

Fang Wushang remained defiant: “This humble officer answers only—”

Liang Shixian sensed danger.

Wrong—Li Ying’s tone is off.

Liang Shixian, knowledgeable in many matters, shifted into “social wisdom” mode—scanning Li Ying’s anger, the hand on his sword, the question’s peril. Like spinning lanterns, possibilities raced through his mind, clicking on one.

Li Ying is probing Fang Wushang’s connections! With no backing, he’ll execute him immediately.

This cascade of thought took an instant—before Fang Wushang finished his sentence.

Liang Shixian coughed sharply, cutting him off. He interjected: “Patrol Officer Fang is my friend. We attended lectures together at Donglin Academy. Its scholars deeply respect his prowess...”

Li Ying hissed, moving his hand from his sword.

Damn it! No wonder he’s so bold—a Donglin Party fanatic! Don’t provoke them. But how’d a minor inspector cling to that faction?

Reconsidering, he understood: Patrol Officer was a ninth-rank military role, yet embedded in the civilian system—it was complicated.

Li Ying snorted. Fine—this place is toxic. Two Donglin dogs... whatever I do could trigger impeachment suits.

“Bold, you two,” Li Ying sneered. He turned his horse. To his deputy, he said: “We leave. To crush rebels—no time wasted here. These fools’ blathering ruins my strategy.”

Watching, Li Daoxuan clicked his tongue in amazement. Fascinating! The unorthodox duo of Liang and Fang partnered once! Officialdom truly amazes.

Chapter 248: Let’s Chase Him Out

Li Daoxuan stood by as a complete spectator, assuming Li Ying would lead his troops westward after being “exposed by the Donglin faction for avoiding battle”—even if just for show.

But he quickly realized he’d overestimated the man’s character.

After leaving the county town, Li Ying tilted his head, pondered for a moment, then chuckled. “We’ll head north to Fengyuan Town. That place is ideal too—connected northward to Yan’an Prefecture. Stationed there, we can advance or retreat flexibly while staying far from those Donglin mad dogs.”

His deputy whispered, “General, our provisions are scarce. Since we failed to secure grain in Chengcheng County, the coming days will be tough.”

Li Ying snorted. “The main road to Fengyuan Town runs through populated areas. We’ll just forage along the way.”

The deputy chuckled darkly.

True to their word, they marched north along the official road...

Soon, they spotted a small roadside tea shop. Li Ying pretended not to see it, but his deputy waved a command. Soldiers stormed inside, smashing and grabbing everything of value—meager coins and food included. The shopkeeper cowered in the back room, trembling, too afraid to intervene.

The officials pressed northward. Not far ahead lay a small inn. The deputy waved again; another unit charged in to loot and destroy...

Watching their rampage unfold, Li Daoxuan felt rage simmering inside. Were this happening in Gaojia Village, he'd have already struck them down with a slap.

This Guerrilla General Li Ying clearly needed discipline!

A divine slap as punishment?

No. He couldn't handle everything personally. Matters his followers could resolve should be left to them.

Besides, this man was walking experience points—perfect for his people to practice combat skills against. Chances to battle proper officials didn't come often.

Li Daoxuan blew sharply toward Li Ying's forces.

A gale howled, nearly toppling Li Ying. Alarmed, he steadied himself while his soldiers swayed helplessly.

"No more looting!" he bellowed. "This place reeks of sorcery—the wind's targeting us! Move! On to Fengyuan Town!"

The officials quickened their pace, not daring further mischief.

Li Daoxuan tossed pinches of flour before the owners of the ransacked tea shop and inn.

Neither knew where it came from but sensed divine protection. They knelt and kowtowed skyward.

Li Daoxuan's finger flicked, shifting his vision back to Gaojia Village.

Two moods coexisted there now.

Ordinary villagers remained blissful—farming, laboring, studying as usual.

But the militia, led by Cheng Xu, was preparing for battle, polishing weapons and brimming with zeal.

Searching the crowd for Gao Yiye, Li Daoxuan found the girl—freshly returned from the county town—already restored to cheerfulness. She sprinted along the field edges with Gao Sanwa, Young Master Bai, and Third Miss.

“How sure are you about the ghostly fire?” Gao Yiye shouted.

“Positive!” Gao Sanwa insisted. “Right over that slope. Floats out nightly, glowing eerily—terrifying!”

Third Miss gasped. “Should we go? What if ghosts devour us?”

Young Master Bai scoffed. “Impossible! How could ghosts haunt where the Deity resides? It must be a physics phenomenon I've yet to study.”

The four teenagers thudded up the slope but circled fruitlessly; daylight revealed no ghosts.

Seeing their playfulness wane, Li Daoxuan spoke. “Yiye, find Cheng Xu. Deliver my command.”

Gao Yiye jumped up with an “ah” sound: “Yes, I'll go right away.”

“Rest assured, it won't take many words, you'll be back to see the will-o'-wisp before dark.”

Gao Yiye: "Deity, will there really be a will-o'-wisp?"

Li Daoxuan smiled: "The will-o'-wisp should actually be called phosphorescent fire; it's not a ghost, but a chemical phenomenon. Hmm, now that I think of it, Young Master Bai and Third Miss are almost ready to learn 'Junior High Chemistry.' Tomorrow, I'll have the woodcarver start making that book."

Gao Yiye: "Wow, if I tell this to Young Master Bai, he'll surely be very happy."

Li Daoxuan smiled with an expression kind and paternal, like that of an old father.

However, when Gao Yiye ran to Cheng Xu, Li Daoxuan's expression suddenly turned fierce. Roaring like a fierce dragon, he said: "Cheng Xu, gather the troops and prepare to handle someone."

Cheng Xu hurriedly cupped his hands toward the air: "Are we dealing with the rebel band in Guyuan?"

"Not at all!" Li Daoxuan said with a stern face: "We're dealing with Guerrilla General Li Ying."

Cheng Xu, hailing from years of grassroots struggle, had mostly heard of famed figures in the Shaanxi officialdom, especially among military ranks. Hearing Li Ying's name, he frowned: "Has that guy been appointed Guerrilla General and come to us now? Hey, are we going to teach him a lesson? I get it, I get it..."

Li Daoxuan: "What do you get?"

Cheng Xu said: "Li Ying is notorious for lax military discipline; he's useless against enemies but a master at extorting money and plundering commoners. Most military officials in Shaanxi are more or less aware of this. Some civil officials have impeached him multiple times, but it all got suppressed by Provincial Governor Hu Tingyan. Hey... Provincial Governor was likely bribed well by Li Ying... At times I suspected half the wealth Li Ying robbed from commoners ended up in Provincial Governor's pocket."

Li Daoxuan felt somewhat speechless, but not at all surprised.

Cheng Xu rushed with pride and shouted at the militia: “You wastes, remember what Instructor said to you last time? What did Deity organize you for?”

The five hundred militiamen replied in unison: “To fight for the common people!”

Cheng Xu laughed with a “heh”: “Alright, now your chance has come. Guerrilla General Li Ying has arrived in Chengcheng County. That fellow named Li Ying, though an official, has always acted like a bandit—oppressing good civilians and looting commoners’ wealth. Deity has just issued a divine decree, ordering us to expel that villain Li Ying out of Chengcheng County.”

Everyone froze momentarily, feeling a bit scared.

In the past, they fought bandits; it was honorable warfare with no inner burdens. This time they actually had to fight officials? Were they truly rebelling?

This... this...

While they hesitated, Ground Rabbit suddenly burst into loud laughter: “Finally, finally, hahaha, Mr. Rabbit knew we’d end up fighting officials sooner or later. Hahaha, Mr. Rabbit already hated those officials who oppress good civilians. Hahaha, at last I can uphold heaven’s justice, hahahaha.”

He swiftly drew his ancestral sword.

That sword had long been ground to a gleaming silver.

He held the sword and swung it wildly with a “swish swish swish,” showing no trace of form, because he still hadn’t gotten any sword technique manual and knew no sword skills.

But this didn’t hinder his performance. He raised the long sword, looked up to the sky, and laughed: “I’ll use this move, the Celestial Rabbit Sword, to slay all the wicked officials!”

Spurred by his commotion, the previously hesitant militia suddenly rushed with pride, especially soldiers from Qingjian County who roared: “Right! Kill all those shitty officials who oppress good civilians!”

Only Cheng Xu sarcastically remarked: “There are good people among the officials too. Why all this roaring excitement over nothing? That stupid rabbit, your Celestial Rabbit Sword is just a random slash—stop acting like it’s some grand technique.”

Chapter 249: You Are the Rebel Band in Guyuan

Cheng Xu finished mobilizing the troops, instructing all Militia Soldiers to conduct a final inventory of their gear and provisions.

He then took Gao Yiye, trekked over the small mountain, and arrived at a secluded spot with no one around. Only then did he lift his head toward the sky and say, “Deity, this humble servant has a question.”

Li Daoxuan, seeing him pull Gao Yiye away from the crowd, had already guessed he had something to ask. “Ask.”

Cheng Xu spoke respectfully, “Gaojia Village currently has just over four thousand people. Even adding a few hundred from Bai Family Fortress, the total barely reaches five thousand. Isn’t confronting the imperial court with such strength premature? Even with your divine assistance from the skies—we might win one battle, a hundred battles, remain undefeated—we lack enough capable people to govern this world. Conquering it would be easy for you, Deity, but governing it well? Relying on our mere five thousand? That is far, far from sufficient.”

Li Daoxuan chuckled. “Do you think I intend for Gaojia Village to... rebelled right now?”

Cheng Xu: “Huh? Isn’t that so? A Guerrilla General is no minor official. Once we eliminate him, Gaojia Village will inevitably draw the court’s attention. Continuing to hide away like a paradise land? That won’t be possible.”

Li Daoxuan: “Who said it was done by Gaojia Village? You are clearly the... rebel band in Guyuan.”

As soon as these words were uttered, Cheng Xu froze.

A few seconds later, he suddenly slapped his forehead, eyes wide with realization. “Ah! Right! I’m wearing Mountain-patterned Armor. My five hundred Militia Soldiers are all armored, carrying crossbows, holding spears with iron heads, and wearing waist knives at their hips. Every last one looks more like an official’s soldier than a villager. Why do I insist on saying I’m from Gaojia Village? When we attack Li Ying, we just need to say we are the rebel band in Guyuan!”

Li Daoxuan: “Exactly. We in Gaojia Village are all law-abiding common folk. How could we possibly attack officials? That is utterly impossible. Defiantly attacking officials? Only fearless soldiers of the border army could do such a thing.”

Cheng Xu: “Hahaha! Deity! Deity, your venerable self—”

He forcefully bit back the second half of his thought: truly enjoys toying with people.

Voicing it would be disrespectful. Knowing it in his heart was enough.

Li Daoxuan guessed his unspoken words from his tone and couldn’t help but smile faintly. Mischievous? Yes, that’s the plan. He refused to be one of those stuffy, wooden, pretentious deities.

Cheng Xu, now without hesitation, dashed back to the Militia Soldiers.

“Everyone prepare a cloth mask. Cover your faces. Remember,” he announced, “I am no longer Instructor He. You call me ‘Old Ghost from Guyuan’, or Captain Ghost works too. Hehehe...”

Saying this, a sense of smugness surged within him. Previously, he was just a ninth-rank inspector with barely a hundred men under him, no path for promotion, thinking that was all his life held. Never imagined that after pledging loyalty to Gaojia Village, his status kept growing. Now leading five hundred men, he could call himself Commander! Just the thought felt rather satisfying.

Losing a horse could be a blessing in disguise.

Life was sometimes full of such twists!

He pointed at Gao Chuwu. “You! New name: Big Fool.”

Pointed at Zheng Daniu. “You! Reckless Bull.”

Pointed at Ground Rabbit. “You... Ah, forget it! Never mind! Next!”

Ground Rabbit: “Hey? Huh? Why am I ‘never mind’?”

Five hundred pairs of eyes collectively slanted toward him.

Cheng Xu pulled out a homemade map, scrutinizing it left and right. After a moment’s thought, he declared, “If we directly head from Gaojia Village’s direction to ambush Li Ying, it could easily lead back to us after the fact. Therefore, we first detour through Huanglong Mountain! Then emerge from Huanglong Mountain to take care of Li Ying. Let’s move! To... the train station!”

The five hundred soldiers arrived at the train station, awaiting the carriage running from Bai Family Fortress to Gaojia Village.

Now, several trains went back and forth daily between Bai Family Fortress and Gaojia Village, primarily to facilitate Bai Family Fortress residents coming to the Gaojia Business Circle to purchase supplies.

Although water access was restored at Bai Family Fortress and Horseshoe Lake revived, their material supplies still paled compared to Gaojia Village—especially handicrafts made by the artisans: kitchen knives, farming tools, wooden basins, bamboo basket, pottery jars, cotton cloth, and so on. Bai Family Fortress suffered significant shortages.

A few Bai Family Fortress artisans even “found jobs” in Gaojia Village, commuting by train in the morning and returning in the evening.

Cheng Xu and the militia waited quietly at the platform.

“Woo! Clunking sound! Clunking sound!”

A train chugged into the station. The villagers from Bai Family Fortress who disembarked took one look at the several hundred armored militia on the platform and jumped in fright. “Wa! What are you doing here? You scared us to death!”

Cheng Xu said sternly, “The Militia Soldiers are executing secret military orders from the Deity. You must immediately forget seeing us here. Should you divulge our whereabouts, the Deity will punish you.”

The threat startled the Bai Family Fortress villagers. They quickly clapped hands over their mouths and slipped away unnoticed.

Cheng Xu and his men boarded the train, soon arriving at Bai Family Fortress.

Bai Yuan, seeing the militia arrive, was rather surprised. After a brief exchange with Cheng Xu, understanding the situation, he lowered his voice, “Wang Zuogua of Yichuan’s remnant forces are still active in Huanglong Mountain. Don’t venture too deep into the mountains, Instructor He. Go just inside, then immediately head southwest to exit the mountains. That will put you on the official road to Fengyuan Town.”

Li Daoxuan watched from above as Cheng Xu’s group vanished into Huanglong Mountain...

His vision had only extended to the southern slopes of Huanglong Mountain. Once Cheng Xu’s group entered the mountains, they slipped beyond Li Daoxuan’s sight. A small twist of anxiety stirred within him. He truly worried they might bump into Wang Zuogua inside.

Fortunately, Cheng Xu didn’t penetrate deeply. They entered only briefly. He ordered everyone to mask up, rub mud and grime onto their armor and clothes, making themselves look travel-worn, as if they’d trekked a long distance. Then they emerged from a small valley on the southwest side, returning to Li Daoxuan’s sight.

This time emerging, they were no longer the Militia Soldiers.

Cheng Xu raised a crudely made, tattered banner bearing a huge character “鬼” [Ghost]. Ground Rabbit hoisted another banner inscribed with “还我血汗军饷” [Return our Hard-earned Military Pay]. The group then swaggered ostentatiously toward Fengyuan Town.

The militia's best scout, Shi Jian, led a few subordinates ahead as the main force's eyes. They traveled two miles ahead as the vanguard scouts.

Meanwhile...

Li Ying, the Guerrilla General who had spent his journey pillaging civilians before holing up in Fengyuan Town, was lounging in the home of the town's wealthiest squire. He gnawed on a roast chicken leg, legs comfortably crossed—a picture of ease.

The squire stood to the side, a strained smile plastered onto his face while mentally cursing Li Ying's ancestors eighteen generations back. The man had robbed him of a significant amount of wealth. The loss stung.

A scout ran in from outside, breathless and shocked. "Report, General! Bad news! The rebel band from Guyuan is marching toward Fengyuan Town!"

Li Ying's chicken leg thudded to the ground. "What the hell? What did you say?"

Chapter 250: Return Our Hard-earned Military Pay!

Li Ying jumped in fright, kicking a fallen chicken leg into the air. "Why? How could the rebel band in Guyuan appear directly in Chengcheng County? Damn it! By any reckoning, they shouldn't have come straight here—they should have gone to Jingyang or Fuping first!"

The scout whispered, "It seems they emerged from Huanglong Mountain."

Li Ying's face darkened. "Huanglong Mountain? That blasted hellhole."

Huanglong Mountain sat where three counties converged. With its steep peaks and dense forests, it had long been a den for rogues and rebels. If the Guyuan rebels entered from Yan'an Prefecture and surfaced near Fengyuan Town in Chengcheng County—yes, that was possible.

"Are you certain they're the real Guyuan rebels? Could they just be bandits disguised as rebels, putting on a show?"

The scout murmured, "I saw clearly. About five hundred rebels, all armored like us. Their leader wears Mountain-patterned Armor... All carry crossbows, waist knives, and spears. Top-notch equipment."

Li Ying spat, "Stone and mud—five hundred border army soldiers?"

He turned and saw fear etched on the faces of his deputy and captains behind him.

A nearby local gentry—who'd provided lavish hospitality—spoke up: "Fengyuan Town has walls for defense! We can alert the County Lord and Patrol Officer Fang for reinforcements."

Li Ying snorted silently. Fengyuan's puny town walls? Useless! The border army wouldn't even need siege weapons—with a single human ladder, they'd scale it instantly.

This is the border army we're talking about!

Even two hundred could rout our thousand garrison troops. And what good are those two mad dogs from Donglin? The Donglin Party can't fight worth a damn.

Shoving the gentry hard enough to make him stumble, Li Ying barked for all to hear: "We march out! Meet the Guyuan rebels head-on!"

But once beyond the town's sight, he whispered to his deputy: "The moment Fengyuan vanishes behind us—run."

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Cheng Xu advanced his troops toward Fengyuan Town.

Mid-march, a scout from the Sharp Knife Troop reported, "Instruc—"

"Don't you dare!" Cheng Xu cut in sharply. "Call me Captain Ghost or Old Ghost from Guyuan."

Flustered, the scout stammered, “C-Captain Ghost... Guerrilla General Li Ying has left Fengyuan Town... He’s marching toward us.”

“Oh?” A flicker of panic stirred in Cheng Xu’s chest.

The Sharp Knife Troop drilled relentlessly—well-fed, well-armed, bursting with vigor. But they remained militia, untested against true warriors.

Bandits? No problem. But five hundred against Li Ying’s thousand officials? Cheng Xu tallied the odds: Less than 30% chance of victory. 70% chance I’ll meet my grandmother today.

He needed a morale boost—fast.

Glancing skyward, he spotted it: a low cloud hanging two hundred meters up. Perfect. The Deity watches. His confidence surged instantly. Victory? Guaranteed.

“Fear nothing!” Cheng Xu laughed loudly. “Li Ying’s nothing! We crush him!”

They marched onward until Li Ying’s force appeared in the distance. Still over 500 meters apart, neither side could engage yet.

Cheng Xu opened his mouth to rally his men—then froze.

Ahead, Li Ying’s troops suddenly milled about. Finding their eastward path blocked by a valley, they pivoted sharply—and sprinted west.

Cheng Xu: “???”

The Sharp Knife Troop behind him: “???”

Gao Chuwu: "Wow, they haven't even started fighting. How did they escape?"

Ground Rabbit: "Haha, they were scared off by my imposing presence."

Cheng Xu froze for a brief moment, then suddenly realized: "Damn it, I was still afraid of them, yet they're afraid of us too. We're now the border army. Hahaha, chase, chase, chase! Chase them and fight."

The militia yelled and charged after Li Ying's troops.

Li Ying was cursing furiously at that moment. After leaving Fengyuan Town, he had planned to flee instantly once out of sight, since he couldn't run away openly before the whole town. If the gentry reported him to the magistrate, and the magistrate impeached him, that would be unbearable. So, fleeing had to happen in a deserted spot.

Unexpectedly, the militia instructor of Fengyuan Town didn't get the hint and insisted on bringing the militia to "lend support," trailing him like a shadow.

This made him uneasy!

Wanting to flee but unable to do so easily, he forged ahead north for a stretch and then clashed directly with the border army in Guyuan.

Li Ying just glanced and confirmed ahead was proper Ming army. Their orderly gear proved they weren't bandits, and they raised two banners: one had the character "Ghost," a nickname used to spare relatives blame. The other read "Return our Hard-earned Military Pay." Wasn't this exactly a rebel force demanding pay?

Couldn't win!

Garrison troops absolutely couldn't defeat border soldiers!

Li Ying decided instantly: "Run!"

He wasn't concerned at that moment about whether the militia followed behind. If seen escaping, so be it; if impeached by officials, so be it. Escape first now, at least to live longer.

Looking east, a valley blocked flight, so he ran west.

The Ming army of a thousand men sprinted off.

This running left the militia behind bewildered: "They had a thousand against five hundred of us, with our militia backing them up; why did the officials run?"

The militia instructor gasped and retreated urgently backward.

Then, they saw the rebel band in Guyuan chasing fiercely. The leading general, clad in Mountain-patterned Armor, shouted at the commander ahead: "Guerilla Li Ying, where are you fleeing? Pay back the military wages you owe us."

Li Ying, scared senseless, fled while yelling: "If you want pay, go to Xi'an. Why pursue me?"

Cheng Xu hollered: "I'll demand it from whoever I encounter."

Li Ying: "Don't come any closer."

Cheng Xu: "Leave everything valuable you have behind."

Li Ying actually complied, tossing his heavy helmet to the ground and ditching the silver he had coerced from the gentry in Fengyuan Town, fleeing wildly.

Cheng Xu chased earnestly anyway, since the Deity was still overhead. Cheng Xu fought bravely as a tiger in victorious battles, disregarding dangers like chasing a fleeing foe. Could the Deity above cause him to be ambushed? Chase on!

As they pursued, he found Li Ying's helmet on the ground. It seemed fine, so he picked it up, hung it at his waist, and continued chasing.

The officials fled ahead, with the rebel band in Guyuan behind. In an instant, everyone raced westward.

Only the militia instructor of Fengyuan Town remained, stiffly standing with several hundred militiamen:  
"What were we even here for?"